



Chapter 5

Santa Fe Rally

We chased George's balloons for over two and a half years. During this time he replaced Snap Dragon with a newer and larger balloon named Bright Future. Most of the time George flew in the Albuquerque area, but occasionally we would go to special out of town rallies.

Rallies are events where balloonists get together to fly for fun and test their skills in balloon flying. Flying and chasing over different terrain was a challenge and somewhat unpredictable; one particular rally in Santa Fe provided more excitement than we were really looking for. It was to be the first of what the promoters hoped would become an annual event. We left Albuquerque long before dawn to be sure we were on time. The launch site in Santa Fe was on an old, converted landfill west of the city. By the time we arrived the wind was blowing well over the ten knot limit, so all we could do was stand around and wait to see if it would calm down.

As a general rule balloons are not launched if the surface winds are above ten knots, which is between eleven and twelve miles per hour. Now to most people this doesn't seem like a lot of wind, but when you are trying to control a five story high balloon in even a moderate breeze, the whole balloon acts like a giant sail. It can drag several people around like rag dolls. Once in a while George would launch the balloon in marginal winds just to see if he could do it, but most of the time he played it safe.

This morning the weather couldn't seem to make up its mind on what it wanted to do. The wind calmed down, three or four balloons laid out their gondolas and hooked up the envelopes, and then it started to blow again. The changes were frustrating. To top this off the rally had been well advertised so the people in Santa Fe had turned out in droves. The crowd of spectators wanted a show and this made everyone want to fly that much more.

I had my usual cup of coffee in my hand and was leaning against the bottom of the basket. We had hooked up the envelope on Bright Future, but we hadn't pulled it out of the storage bag yet. There was no need to hurry because by this time our crew was efficient enough we could finish the rest of the job and have the balloon in the air in a few minutes anyway. Keeping it in the storage bag until we were ready to go reduced the chances of someone accidentally stepping on it.

"It looks like we bombed out," I commented.

"Oh, I don't know," George answered. "It seems to be letting up a little."

I tested the wind with what was now an experienced cheek. It did seem to be lessening. The small bushes and grasstops were a good indicator, and they definitely were not waving as hard as they had been a few minutes ago. We waited a few more minutes and the wind died a little more.

"Do you want us to lay her out?" I asked.

"Yeah. I think so. Just to be safe, let's also get a second inflator just in case we need it."

The second inflator was used during a high wind launch to help pack more air into the envelope more quickly. By the time we brought over the second inflator, the wind had died down to about five to six miles an hour. This was well within launch limits, so we grabbed the storage bag and laid the envelope out. Two other balloons on either side did the same. The event for the day was a "Hare and Hound Race." A lead balloon would take off as the hare. About ten minutes later the rest of the balloons would take off as hounds. The hare balloon would use every possible trick in the book to lose the hounds and then land and put out a large white plastic cross on the ground. The hound balloons would attempt to follow and land as close to the center of the cross as possible.

The hare balloon inflated with only a few minor problems and took off amid cheers from the large crowd of spectators. We started our inflators and the balloon was about two-thirds inflated when the wind picked up again and a large cupped area appeared in the top side of the envelope. The balloons started to roll and bang against each other.

"Phil, you and Jim get some lateral control." George called. Jim was a friend of George's and was supposed to take a ride that morning. The two boys grabbed hold of two of the support lines which ran the length of the balloon and carefully walked hand over hand up them until they could control the rolling of the envelope. They had to be careful because a missed hand hold could mean tearing the envelope.

The wind did not let up. I looked at George. He had to make the decision. Launch or rip-out.

"Let's get this damn thing in the air," he shouted.

Everything now depended on coordination and quick action. Several people from other chase crews stepped up to help. Four people were stationed to hold back on the handles along the bottom of the basket to try to keep the balloon from dragging along the ground. I sent two other people to help Judy and Laurlie on the crown line. The two inflators were cranked up to full power and George stepped in to light the burner pilot.

The idea was to pack the balloon as full of cold air as we could get it and then heat it up and get it off the ground and into the air as quickly as possible. The wind was already up to the point it was dragging the gondola in short hops even though four people were trying to hold it back. The longer we waited, the more chance there was the balloon would be damaged. The wind was pushing the fabric down so there was less and less space to shoot the flame without touching and burning the envelope.

"Let's go," George yelled. I stepped up to help him with the superstructure. The burner came on full blast. No waiting while we carefully heated up in stages this time; it had to be fast or never. Bright Future heaved at the people trying to control her and George hollered at the passenger who was to go with him, "Get in, get in the bottom of the basket, and stay down."

The envelope came off the ground, rolled to the side, and then slammed against the balloon beside us. I could see the fabric caving in toward the searing column of flame from the burner. George quickly directed the flame away from the bulge but did not let up on the burner. The envelope was off the ground and becoming buoyant, but the basket and the envelope were still tilted at about a forty five degree angle.

"Pick the basket up and let's get her upright," George said. We let the basket slide. As the balloon heated the crew walked with it carrying part of the weight until the gondola was under the envelope instead of angled out to one side. It was tricky. Bright Future straightened up and the dish shaped bulge on the windward side of the balloon filled out as the balloon started to move with the wind. Some of the weight came off our hands, but we still couldn't let go until we were sure the lift on the balloon was sufficient to carry the weight. If we let go too soon the balloon would just bang back into the ground and the chances for accidentally damaging the balloon and the passengers would increase.

"Let her go," George finally yelled and we stepped away. The balloon was clearing the ground, but not by much. It painfully gained altitude as we all held our breath. Suddenly we saw a young man charging across the field chasing another balloon. Everyone yelled at him, but he angled across the field and never looked back. The basket on Bright Future caught up with him running full tilt and rolled him like a ball. Concerned, we rushed up to him. He rolled over and looked up at us from a face covered with dust and laughed.

"I'm OK," he said and rolled to his feet. I looked up and saw Bright Future moving away at an alarming rate of speed. As we sprinted for the truck we could see that two other balloons were also up and in hot pursuit. A couple more were still trying to launch. The winds were carrying the balloons directly across the city. On the far side of the city the country was open, but the New Mexico State Prison was also in the same direction. We had been warned to either land before reaching the prison grounds or overfly the prison by at least 1500 feet. If anyone happened to land on the prison grounds, the balloon and her passengers could expect to be guests of the State of New Mexico for some time while they explained. If George had

to land before we could catch up, he would most likely have to rip out and we would have no way of finding him. If he had to overfly the prison, there were very few roads on the far side and all of them were at least three miles beyond the prison.

The road down from the landfill was crooked and full of ruts. I couldn't go very fast without bouncing the pickup all over the road and the people in the back were riding on a lot less padding than I was. The pickup truck danced on a washboardy section of the road. I glanced in the rearview mirror and could see heads bouncing up and down like corn popping.

"How are you guys doing?" I hollered through the open back window.

"My bottom is too numb to tell," Kevin groaned.

"Keep your hands inside the pickup bed," Judy yelled. "We might scrape a few trees on the way."

"What am I supposed to hang onto?" Phil yelled back. "If I let go now, I'll end up in the top of one of them trees."

I slowed down enough to let the crew rearrange themselves and then stomped on the gas again. We finally hit the bottom of the hill and were back on the pavement. We could occasionally catch a glimpse of Bright Future over the tops of the houses and between the trees, but most of the time she was out of sight. Everytime we did see her, the image was growing smaller and that was bad; it meant we were falling further and further behind. The best bet for catching up seemed to be by crossing the city on the only major street. Unfortunately, it was also the busiest and had the most stoplights. After two frustrating waits for red lights we finally topped a hill and sighted our balloon. I also sighted flashing red lights ahead.

"Oh, damn, here comes a train." The traffic ground to a halt and we were once again stopped and jammed between two cars. A switch engine and a long line of cars started to chug slowly past. The engineer blasted merrily on the air horn and the train stopped, blocking the street. I thought about where I would like to see that air horn stuffed.

"Hey! There's a vacant lot over here," Judy pointed to a trash covered corner lot with a bunch of chickens feeding in the middle.

"Hold on, let's go for it," I hollered and wheeled the truck across the dirt lot and headed down a side road. The crew in the back coughed and spit and waved their hands as dust fogged up around them.

"I hope the owner didn't mind you scaring the stuffing out of his chickens," Judy howled with laughter. "Now what?"

"You might check and see if any of them landed in the back. I think we can take Agua Fria road and come out south of where George is," I said and concentrated on trying to miss the potholes in the road. "Just tell me whenever you can spot George."

Agua Fria road was a mixture of pavement and gravel, running along the west edge of town. We had almost two miles to go before we could turn back toward the direction the balloons had been heading. Tall trees lined the roadway and we couldn't see Bright Future anywhere. An old beatup pickup truck pulled out in front of us and ambled down the road trailing exhaust smoke and dust. Two kids in the back waved and then laughed when I jammed on the brakes to keep from climbing up their tailgate. From the yelling and banging in the back of our truck, it sounded like everyone had ended up in a heap and were all trying to untangle themselves. The comments were not complimentary of my driving skills. We finally found a place to pass and reached the crossroad.

"Any sign of the balloon?" I asked, discouraged. Enough time had passed that George either had to be on the ground or a long way out into the open country.

"No, we'd just as well slow down," Judy said. "It looks like he probably had to rip out. We can probably tell better once we get to the freeway."

We finally pulled out on the far side of town and reached an open area where we could see beyond the buildings and trees. Bright Future and three other balloons were floating just above the ground in a large field about a mile away. In our concentration on the problems of crossing the city, we had failed to realize the New Mexico weather had done it to us again. It was now almost dead calm.

I pulled the truck out into the field and we walked up to where the balloon was floating about fifty feet above the ground.

"Where have you been?" George grinned. "I've been wait'n here for about fifteen minutes."

"Oh, we stopped at the doughnut shop to get some coffee," I shot back.

"Save any for me?" George drawled.

"Nope. You rushed off so fast I didn't think you wanted any," I said and looked around at my dust covered crew. "Are you still going to try for the 'X'?"

"Yep. I'll work around for a while and see what I can do."

Other balloons were coming in by this time and soon the sky was dotted with bright colors. The ground crews all gathered around the area of the "X" to watch the fun. The balloons maneuvered by changing altitudes to catch different wind currents. We cheered anyone who seemed to be working closer and offered observations on the different strategies. George picked up an air current that carried him out about 200 yards and then climbed about fifty feet. The return air currents brought Bright Future back closer to the cross, but not quite dead on. He used the same procedure twice more before it looked like he was lined up perfectly. We cheered madly as he drifted closer. He was about 100 feet from the target when the wind changed and the balloon landed about forty feet from the target. George looked disappointed, but Jim looked happy just to be back on the ground.

"Nice shot," Phil said. "You have the best distance so far."

"I guess," George said as he eyed the distance. "Maybe I should have tried a couple of more times."

"That's OK," Jim said in a shaky voice. "If you don't mind, I think I'd like to get out now."

George looked at the paleness of his face and agreed. We changed passengers and played around in the areas about another hour while the other balloons tried their luck. Unfortunately, two of them did better and George ended up with third place. Afterwards, everyone gathered for the usual party. We were all standing in a group, munching on cheese and crackers when we heard someone from another crew say, "When we passed Agua Fria Road there were chickens and feathers scattered everywhere!" The crew looked at me and grinned, but no one said anything.